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VENTURING INTO DISCOURSE– ANOTHER LOOK AT THE ISSUE OF YOUTH AT RISK

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Abstract

It is said that youth serves as a mirror of the communities they live in so it is no wonder that youth at risk is an issue of concern in many countries around the world. Definitions of youth at risk refer to educational issues (low achievements, low attendance, and dropping out of school), behavioural issues (use of drugs and drinking problems, dangerous and promiscuous behaviours) and social characteristics and deficiencies (such as race, socio-economic status, gender and tendency to get in trouble with the law). Youth is regarded as a transitory (and difficult) period, leading up to adulthood, therefore different educational models are used in order to prepare this youth for adulthood and participation in the mainstream workforce. This paper will provide a short survey of literature regarding mainly educational work conducted with youth at risk in a number of western countries. It will aim to examine discourse on the subject of youth at risk and point out the need to continue and strengthen the process of changing this discourse from a "change-the-youth" approach which places full responsibility on the young individuals, to a "change-the-system" outlook – whereby governments and organizations take the responsibility for initiating change in dealing with youth at risk.

Keywords: Youth at risk, discourse, education.

1. Introduction

There seems to be no need to explain the term "youth-at-risk". The "at-risk" discourse, regarding educational and therapeutic work with youth is, in many aspects, worldwide and relies on widely accepted definitions. These definitions tend to stigmatize, use deficit language and focus on negative behaviours and tendencies of youth. Youth is regarded as a transitory (and difficult) period, leading up to adulthood. In light of this approach, programs provided for youth at risk (such as alternative schooling) are mainly intended to prepare and fit them into socially accepted, normative adult life. Academic research in the last decade has raised questions regarding this discourse and the population it refers to, while suggesting new approaches and methods of work. This paper aims to survey some of these different approaches and methods of work in different western countries, with an emphasis on educational aspects, since schooling (or lack of schooling) is deemed as a central "at-risk" parameter. In light of the survey a new angle for addressing the issue will be suggested.

2. Discourse and practice

Foucault defines discourse as "ways of constructing and imparting knowledge in concert with social practices and power relations" (in Touzard, 2010, p.2). Surveying literature in the field of youth at risk suggests that current knowledge has been constructed due to a recurring use of more or less the same definitions and refers to similar power relations between societies and this type of youth. Definitions refer mainly to educational issues (low achievements, low attendance, and dropping out of school), behavioral issues (use of drugs and drinking problems, dangerous and promiscuous behaviors) and social characteristics and deficiencies (such as race, socio-economic status, gender and tendency to get in trouble with the law). As a result, these definitions tend to stigmatize, use deficit language and focus on negative behaviors and tendencies of young people. It is a "deficit view of youth" which leans towards the negative characteristics and less towards the strengths, resources or potential that they possess. Furthermore, simply referring to youth as "at risk" encourages this deficit view and limits opportunities for them to move past these negative constructions (Te Riele,2006, in Touzard, 2010, p.19) and gain social mobility.

An initial step in this direction is the way in which youth is grasped. This period of life, between childhood and adulthood, has (and still is) regarded as a transitory and difficult time. Woodman and Wyn (2013) suggest that youth and adulthood are no longer defined stages of life with clear and obvious transitions from one to the other, as proposed by Karl Mannheim and others. They argue that the concept of youth as transition and successful movement from study into the workforce does not take into account social inclusion (Woodman & Wyn 2013 p.266) and that the process as a whole is much more complex. If, in the past normativity included the "achievement of socio-biological milestones according to a standard timeline", today "young people forge generational patterns in response to their conditions of life." (Woodman and Wyn, 2013, Table 1).

Academic research in the fast few years has raised questions regarding this discourse and the population it refers to, proposing a transition from a "change-the-individual" to a "change-the-system" outlook. This is accompanied by the understanding that there is a growing need for new approaches and

methods of work, due to the realization that the traditional "at risk" discourse, largely placing responsibility on the individual and his/her behavior and the need to change it, requires rethinking.

In light of the changing outlook, programs provided for youth at risk, aiming to prepare for and fit them into socially accepted, normative adult life, need to be re-evaluated. Touzard (2010) , explored the at-risk discourse in three alternative schools in the American system. In two of the schools she found that service providers tended to use traditional risk discourse (TRD) including negative feedback, focus on negative aspects and behaviors of individuals and power-based relations. This negative "change-the-youth" approach placed the responsibility for change on the young individuals. Such attitudes did not promote positive change in youth and did not assist them in making the expected transition into "normal" adulthood, as defined by white, middle-class norms. Instead, they reconstructed the same experiences of rejection these youth had undergone in the traditional schools. In the third school staff actively chose to resist the traditional risk discourse and take up a "change-the-system" approach and support youth through positive and empowering dialogue. This attitude proved to be effective and supportive, as reported by youth regarding their experience at this school.

In the three schools discourse had a significant effect on the relationships between staff and youth, on youth's self-esteem, taking of responsibility, leadership and identification of possibilities for social mobility. The "change-the-system" approach appeared as more likely to assist youth in transforming, maximizing their potential and growing emotionally and intellectually (Touzard, 2010, p.142). It may be hoped that such findings will encourage other schools, in the regular and the alternative systems to re-examine their approaches and actions when working with youth.

Changing the system and approaching youth at risk differently was the focus of another study, conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area. Watson (2008) portrayed the work of four educators working successfully with youth at risk. As she noted, youth characterizations included living conditions (poverty, inner-city neighborhoods) and physical, psychological, economic and social stressors that could lead to dropping out of school, engaging in high risk behavior and involvement with the law. While, she added, this information was useful for indicating the stressors youth face, it was also dangerous " because (these characterizations could) negatively categorize and label young people" (Watson, 2008, p.6). The community-based educators portrayed in the study did not use the term "at-risk" but rather each one of them engaged in a pedagogy he/she saw as assisting in the empowerment of youth: pedagogy of communication, encouraging dialogue between teacher and students and amongst the students themselves; pedagogy of community – encouraging involvement and youth leadership; pedagogy of compassion – enabling young people to share their life stories and hardships and develop as agents of change; and pedagogy of commitment – to a common cause (Watson,2008, p.304). Their success, claimed Watson, was due to their approach in working with youth-at-risk. They all stressed the need to connect with the youth, before dealing with the content or, in Watson's words "these teachers show(ed) that *caring* is as important as *curriculum*" (p.305).

Another study, examining the tension between discourses of social control and social justice was conducted by Wishart Taylor and Shultz (2006) in Alberta, Canada. While social control approach tends to "individualize and pathologize" (p.291), the social justice approach seems to be more sensitive to the effects of power relations in defining certain groups of youth as being at risk. This tension, between social control

and social justice, is portrayed in the analysis of the Alberta Government's Learning Report, where, on the one hand, the official call is for a "change-the-system" approach, encouraging schools to make themselves more fitting for all students and not expect those at risk to reform; while, on the other hand, youth at risk continues to be measured by their ability to successfully blend into the adult workforce. This, suggest Wishart Taylor and Shultz (2006), is a "double-edged" policy, as processes of selection, streaming and funding (for students labeled as "special needs") both respond to and produce youth at risk.

As opposed to this "double-edged" policy, Wishart Taylor and Shultz (2006) point out the ability of teachers in alternative schooling to see beyond government requirements for academic achievements, higher studies and employment and identify other, broader, measures of success: "For some students just coming to school on a regular basis is success. And we let them know that as well. Coming to school on time is success. Not fighting in school. Even if they just come here for one or two terms and then have a different way of looking at the world, are able to cooperate with each other, that's success" (Wishart Taylor and Shultz, 2006, p.301).

Yet, they continue, despite the efforts of teachers, so long as alternative schooling is measured against the norms of regular schooling youth at risk will be found lacking. Therefore, there is need for school administrators to "embrace a vision of inclusive schooling and work to develop multiple competencies of students inside and outside of school (Wishart Taylor and Shultz, 2006, p.302). Within schools, they conclude, teachers should shift away from social control and move towards a social justice discourse, adopt a critical pedagogy and, together with students "engage in a critical analysis of the systemic construction of risk and the potential for agency in their lives." (p.302).

In Australia too, the incompletion of high school is connected to youth "at risk" and, as stated by Te Riele (2006) "this identification has set up a false distinction between a supposed "problematic minority" versus a "normal majority" (p.129). This "problematic minority" is given certain group and individual characteristics which, again, define youth at risk as deficit, while not taking into account the responsibilities of government and schooling policy. Te Riele (2006) found that negative student- teacher relations had a most significant effect on "at risk" students. Following were lack of interest and relevance of the curriculum and lack of flexibility and supporting school services. All these contributed to leaving school, yet a positive student-teacher relationship played a key role in assisting "at risk" students to remain in school. In this case too it is suggested that discourse needs to change from a "fix-the–student" approach to re-examining current definitions and policies and offering a broader interpretation of the term "at risk", in light of changing global conditions, which will be further discussed. These findings may suggest the need to assist teachers, through appropriate training, in changing their discourse regarding youth at risk.

Though a process of change may be detected, the educational emphasis of work with youth at risk is still on preparation for and integration into the current workforce, even in countries such as Finland and Israel, were there are strong links between the educational and therapeutic aspects of working with youth at risk. In Finland the educational system is constructed so that the vast majority of youth completes an upper secondary education (beyond the compulsory nine-year schooling), either in general upper secondary or in vocational schools. A policy of inclusion enables addressing a wide range of special needs, be they cognitive, social or other. Only two percent of the children defined as "high risk" are placed, for limited periods of time, in residential education with the aim of assisting them in returning to the general system

(Jahnukainen, 2007). Thus, the focus of educational work shifts to young adults who are not engaged in education or work (Brunila, 2012). They are considered "at risk". It is obligatory for them to participate in publicly funded educational projects in preparation for integration into the work force (Brunila, 2012). Discourse concentrates on the therapeutic and emotional aspects of preparation, through short term work projects. Brunila (2012) criticizes these tools as they stem from a deficit and individualistic outlook,yet there is also acknowledgment of their potential.

The Israeli model of working with youth at risk and high school dropouts is based on reaching out to youth and offering them a combination of socio-educational encounters, among them the opportunity to study and meet the formal demands of Israel's educational system. The core approach is that of "social pedagogy" (Lahav, 2010, p.5) applied through "multi system intervention" (Lahav, 2010, p.5). This approach aims to promote the mental resilience of youth at risk, by enabling them to experience success in different fields of life such as education, work and interpersonal relations with peers and family (Shemesh & Shemesh, 2010). The discourse is a therapeutic one, focusing on expanding the repertoire of possible reactions to life situations, in order to build up mental resilience. As Shemesh and Shemesh (2010, p.132) point out factors such as positive family ties, social involvement and studying assist in promoting mental resilience and the reduction of risk behaviors. Therefore, one of the main means of intervention is providing an alternative schooling program in order to enable high-school dropouts to complete their education and receive diplomas.

3. Conclusion

The issue of youth at risk is complex and multi-layered. Changing discourse and new approaches to working with this youth are welcome, yet they serve only as partial solutions in dealing with the problem. Alongside them, preventive measures need to be taken so that youth will not reach the risk situations. These include structure and policy changes in the regular school systems (in order to prevent dropping out) and continued war on poverty, drugs and alcohol consumption. Furthermore, it may be suggested that there is also a need to take a step back and regard the issue of youth at risk as part of a larger narrative .Today, youth as a category, and not only certain groups of youth are exposed to fast pace global changes, including rapidly changing technology which has great influence on the labor market and tomorrow's professions, as well as on personal relationships. Woodman, Threadgold and Possamai - Inesedy (2015) point to the withering of traditional certainties, growing individualization and the difficulty of making the 'right' decisions in this situation. In light of these changes educational goals set for youth at risk and youth in general need to be re-examined.

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